

## **`URBAN NUTCRACKER' MAY LAND AT STRAND**

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Arts

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Dance impresario Tony Williams takes a deep breath before he says it: "Nothing is in writing," notes the artistic director of the Jamaica Plain troupe Ballet-Rox. "But yes, the City of Boston has asked us to bring 'Urban Nutcracker' " to the Strand Theatre in Uphams Corner for a weeklong run in December.

Indeed, if things work out as ballet and city officials hope, "Urban Nutcracker" will be this year's anchor tenant at a newly renovated, revitalized Strand.

"It's ironic and fitting that we would go back there this December," said Williams. It was his complaints about what he said was a pattern of mismanagement and inept marketing during Ballet- Rox disappointing 2003 run of "Urban Nutcracker" that trained a spate of public and media attention on the theater early this year.

The Strand, which is owned by the city, was leased in 1979 to the M. Harriet McCormack Center for the Arts, a Dorchester community group whose 25-year rental agreement expires June 30.

Which is one reason that Mayor Thomas M. Menino paid close attention to Williams's claims - and his threat to bring suit to recover money he was owed for weeks after "Urban Nutcracker" closed. When the choreographer's misgivings about Strand management were echoed by other producers, presenters, and community activists,

Menino launched an investigation.

When the city's initial inquiry found some merit to allegations of mismanagement, irregular accounting, lease infractions, and routine violations of public safety, fire, and entertainment codes, the mayor appointed a special task force to make recommendations on the Strand's future. The group was headed by retired Boston attorney and philanthropist Ken Novack, former vice chairman of America Online.

The task force has interviewed interested parties, held community meetings, and brought in consultants with expertise in revamping and running vintage theaters in run-down neighborhoods, such as the Apollo in Harlem, Novack said. "We're now in the process of drafting a report to the mayor, which we hope to have close to completion by June 30," he said.

The city will issue formal requests for proposals this summer, from parties interested in running the theater. Michelle Baxter, whose box-office experience includes eight years at the Boston Center for the Arts, was named interim manager of the Strand

last month; she has been working at City Hall, soliciting productions and responding to requests for rentals and bookings in the late summer and fall, according to a City Hall spokesman.

Come July 1, Baxter is expected to set up shop at the Strand, where she will work with a team of renovators who will begin to ready the theater for its first significant public event: a July 25 reception for the Indiana delegation to the Democratic National Convention.

The board and management of the McCormack Center will not put forward a proposal to manage the Strand in the future, according to board chairman Juan Evereteze, who blamed the Menino administration and "most of the media" for misrepresenting the work of the Strand staff and McCormack Center management.

No proposal the McCormack Center suggested, said Evereteze, would be considered fairly.

Novack said the task force hopes to see a new Strand management team in place by the end this year - perhaps in time to catch "Urban Nutcracker" in Dorchester.

Not questioning `Q'

News that "Avenue Q" - upset winner of this year's Tony Award for best musical - will settle into an exclusive, open-ended run in Las Vegas rather than launching a national tour has upset producers in secondary theater markets around the country.

But few Boston producers are bemoaning the absence of the show next season.

"It's not that `Avenue Q' canceled a tour to Boston. It's just not coming now," said Tony McLean, president of Broadway in Boston/ Clear Channel Entertainment.